

Board of Education of the  
City of Chicago  
In Re: The Matter of the Proposal  
To Close Stewart Elementary School

Heard Before  
Judge Charles R. Winkler (ret.)  
An Independent Hearing Officer

Report of the proceedings held on April 16, 2013 (5:30 P.M. – 7:30 P.M.) in the hearing room of the Chicago Board of Education at 125 S. Clark Street, Chicago.

Included herein are summaries of the statements of the 11 people who testified at the hearing. In addition, the hearing officer reviewed the transcripts of the community hearings conducted at Amunsen High School April 8, 2013 and April 11, 2013 regarding the same subject matter.

After reviewing the above, the hearing officer will set for his findings, conclusions and recommendations.

**Introduction**

At 5:30 P.M. on Tuesday, April 16, 2013, a hearing convened at the Board of Education of the City of Chicago, 125 South Clark Street, Chicago, Illinois. The purpose of the hearing was to enable the hearing officer to receive public comments from concerned persons, specifically including representatives of the CEO, members of the local school council, parents of the schools' students, members of the staffs, the Principals and students, concerning the CEO's proposed Closing of Stewart Elementary School, located at 4525 N. Kenmore Avenue.

The proposal also includes the relocation of the students to Brennemann Elementary School located at 4251 N. Clarendon Avenue. Parents of students at Stewart will also be given the option of selecting other CPS schools to best meet the student learning needs.

Approximately 28 individuals attended the Public Hearing, not including representatives from CPS. Eight individuals signed in to make public comments on the CEO's proposal and everyone who wanted to make a public comment did in fact testify.

The undersigned summarized below the input received relevant to the issue of whether the CEO's proposal that Stewart be closed and the students relocated to Brennemann at the end of the current school year is justified, predicated on the law and facts as presented and considered by the Hearing Officer.

On behalf of CPS, Jennifer L. Chan, assistant General Counsel for the Board of Education of CPS, made an opening statement. She offered in evidence documents in binder that was marked Exhibit #1 and the Hearing Officer received it in evidence.

Benjamin Felton, Chief Portfolio Officer for CPS, read into the record the results of studies supporting the proposal as set forth in Exhibit #1. Craig Benes, Chief of Schools for Ravenswood Elementary, followed with his report detailing how the proposal would be executed. In response to the Hearing Officer's question regarding specific safety concerns, Mr. Benes stated that the specific plans are to be worked out with the CPD and it would take 90 to 100 days to do so.

Turning to other people who signed up to speak, Dawn Orlando, acting Principal at Stewart and Sarah Abedelal, Principal from Brennemann, stood together in support of the proposal. Ms. Abedelal stated "Dawn and I believe this is the best thing that can be done for the kids." While Ms. Orlando said her kids are scared, Ms. Abedelal said her kids were excited.

Brennemann has partnered with Target and each room at the receiving school will have updated technology. In closing, Ms. Orlando presented a letter from a parent which was marked Exhibit #2 and received in evidence.

Speaker #3, Laura Kristak, a teacher at Stewart, said her first reaction was crying and now "I look forward to new possibilities for our students."

Speaker #4, Ms. Michele Washington, a teacher at Stewart, looks forward to working with Brennemann and Mr. Benes.

Speaker #5, Laura Salerno, teacher at Brennemann, looks forward to collaborating with Stewart to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Speaker #6, Martin Ritter, organizer for Chicago Teachers Union and former teacher at Marshall and Hyde Park High School, has a Masters Degree in Education Leadership. He stated that the highly qualified teachers from Stewart follow their students to Brennemann, that highly trained social workers, clinicians and other mental health workers follow the kids and the number of clinicians be increased to support the Stewart kids.

Mr. Ritter questioned the one million dollar budget of CPS, the moving of 40,000 plus students, the chief administrative officers of CPS not moving their own children and suggested that the people at the Board of Trade and the Mercantile Exchange making billions should pay their fare share.

Speaker #7, Leshia Taomason, parent, is concerned yet hopeful that Brennemann will welcome the Stewart children in the most sincerely and loving way.

Speaker #8, Samantha Lancaster, voiced her concerns regarding safety issues at Courtney, and she was asked to save her comments at 8:00 p.m. as her concerns involved that school.

In response to a question from the Hearing Officer, Jennifer L. Chan responded by email that CPS has proposed that 53 schools be closed and 32,500 students will be impacted by the closing. The number represents all pre K – 7 students in the proposed closing and welcoming schools. Approximately 14,400 are in the closing schools.

Exhibit #1 shows that 256 students are enrolled at Stewart which has a capacity to serve 630 students. The school is less than half full. Brennmann has better facilities with an expanded library, computer and science labs and a playground.

### **Community Meetings**

Two community meetings were held at Amundsen High School, one on 4/8/13 and the other on 4/11/13. The purpose was to receive public comment on the proposal.

Notice of the Public Hearing was served on the parents, teachers, staffs, Principals, and members of the Local School Councils of the affected schools via U. S. Mail, as required by Illinois law, and/or the Board's applicable Policies, Guidelines and Procedures. Notice of the Hearings was also served via hand delivery to the schools. Finally, Notice of the Hearing was served upon the public by newspaper publication in the Chicago Sun-Times and Chicago Tribune Newspapers.

At the 4/8/13 meeting, four community members questioned the reason for the closing of Stewart, why the hearing was not held at Stewart and how the community would be affected. Others had concerns about safety and some were outright opposed to the closing of Stewart. Two others said "The Board of Education is not listening and CPS is not interested in what parents have to say."

Sarah Abedelal, Principal at Brennemann, said her school is ready to be a welcoming environment.

A total of nine people commented.

At the 4-11-13 meeting, six people commented. Martin Ritter, a CTU organizer, was highly critical of the proposal. Reggie Spears, who spoke at the 4/8/13 meeting, again raised the safety issue. Others questioned the class sizes and how CPS will intervene.

### **Findings**

Exhibit #1 established the following:

Notice of the Public Hearing was served on the parents, teachers, staffs, Principals, and members of the Local School Councils of the affected schools via U. S. Mail, as required by Illinois law, and/or the Board's applicable Policies, Guidelines and Procedures. Notice of the Hearings was also served via hand delivery to the schools. Finally, Notice of the Hearing was served upon the public by newspaper publication in the Chicago Sun-Times and Chicago Tribune Newspapers. The facilities at Brennemann are better than those at Stewart.

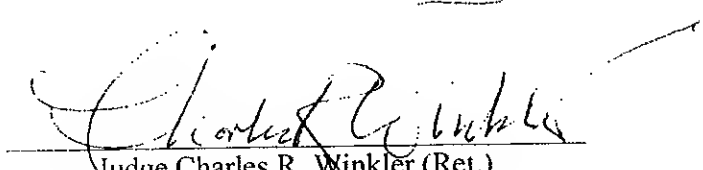
CPS is entitled to move forward with its proposal.

Part of the proposal includes a school safety plan to be in place within the next 90 to 100 days. This is to provide a smooth and safe transition for both the Stewart and Brennemann students.

### **Recommendations**

Since a definitive safety plan will not be ready until late August, 2013, CPS should consider delaying the implementation of the proposal until the 2014-2015 school year. The 256 Stewart students will be traveling a new route to a new school. Will an understaffed Chicago

Police Department be able to provide enough officers to assist the Stewart children? Will CPS hire a private security company to furnish properly trained personnel? Is there really enough time to get everyone up to speed so the 14,400 children from the closing schools are provided safe passage?



Judge Charles R. Winkler (Ret.)